

What's a Telephone Good For? -- Synopsis

Alexander Graham Bell was granted basic patents on the telephone in early 1876. He spent several years successfully defending those patents against rival claimants to the invention, but he had no direct role in the management of the Bell Telephone Company after its incorporation in 1878. Indeed, he disagreed with many of the marketing decisions of that company. "Bell" in the context of the postcard era refers to the company, not the man.

The first telephones were installed in pairs, and each pair was isolated from all others. The invention of the switchboard in 1878 enabled all telephones within a locality to connect with each other. "Long distance" came later, with service from Milwaukee to Madison, Wisconsin, a distance of 90 miles, opening in 1882. Other inter-urban lines followed, gradually, but for some time connections outside a few patchy areas were impossible. The first call from the East to West coasts of the United States was not made until 1915.

Bell's first patents expired in 1893, and independent companies immediately started operating in competition with Bell. Lower prices charged by the independents forced Bell to drop its own prices drastically and change its marketing strategy. Independents introduced cost-cutting measures such as the party line, and Bell had no choice but to follow, although internal memos indicate that service was kept deliberately mediocre on party lines to encourage upgrades. Pay phones, installed in many public areas, enabled those who could not afford their own telephone service or were away from home to connect. The phone was no longer an exotic toy of businessmen and the very rich.

In spite of Bell's attempts at adaptation, in many areas the independents were much more successful than Bell, grabbing over half the market share. For some time Bell telephones and the phones of the independent companies could not call each other, forcing people like doctors and retail businessmen to install more than one telephone. Most of the independents offered local calling only, as Bell refused to allow them to connect to its networks. In 1913 a deal brokered by the Department of Justice forced Bell to make its lines available to outside subscribers, with Bell and the local companies splitting toll charges. The same deal arranged for Bell to buy some independent companies and sell an equal number of phone connections in other areas to competitors. The era of telephone competition quickly came to an end.

The "postcard era" in the United States began in 1898, when private companies were authorized to produce picture postcards, just as the effects of lower telephone costs were beginning to be felt. Now many ordinary citizens could afford a telephone, and service became available in more rural areas, which Bell had long ignored as unprofitable. But what would the new telephone customers use this device for? Advertising from Bell stressed the phone's use for business and in emergency situations. But customers saw other, more enjoyable, ways to use this new way to communicate. Postcards reflected how both the companies and the public saw the telephone in these early years of general availability. On many cards, however, the telephone is not much more than a symbol of status or fashionableness.

This exhibit focuses on the development of the telephone in the United States, as the role of the telephone was seen quite differently here than in other countries, in many of which telephone service was nationalized quite early. Identifying cards by nationality, however, is not always clear. Most postcards from publishers of many nationalities were printed in Germany until 1914. Companies such as Britain's Raphael Tuck sold similar cards in many countries. Publishers cannot always be identified. I have included cards that best tell the story of this

exhibit, excluding any with inscriptions in languages other than English and those clearly identified with another country, such as cards inscribed "Hello from Toronto."

It is often impossible to precisely date unused postcards. Those with "undivided backs" were produced no later than 1907, when the U.S. Post Office changed policy to allow messages on the left half of the address side. Fashions, captions, and even the style of the phones themselves often provide clues. "Printed in Germany" generally means that a card was manufactured before World War I began in 1914. Cards printed after the war started are usually of inferior quality, and the popularity of postcards declined from that point on. Postcards are still sent today, but the popularity of postcards for ordinary communications never fully recovered after World War I.

As the telephone became more and more available and affordable, people started using the new technology for messages previously conveyed by postcard. The postcard had helped popularize its competition

Selected References:

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